



# The Pearl Preview Area 2 Newsletter

USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pearl, MS

S U M M E R - F A L L 2 0 1 3

## Message from the Area Conservationist

As we begin with a new fiscal year, let me first of all thank all of you for the many accomplishments and extra efforts you put forth to make 2013 such a great year!

Even with extreme budget cuts and a government shutdown, we managed to pull off another year of special events, field days, conservation being put on the ground, and erosion control projects.

I am looking forward to working with our new State Conservationist Kurt Readus. It seems like just yesterday I was at the State Office, but I felt the calling of the field! Therefore, I came back to assist the 21 counties in Central MS with achieving their conservation goals.

Even though a new Farm Bill has not passed, we will continue with our conservation programs being administered to the landowners or operators. We will also continue on with the last 2008 Farm Bill rules until Congress gives us a new Farm Bill.



*Left to right: New State Conservationist Kurt Readus, Area Conservationist David Brunson, and Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture Cindy Hyde-Smith prepare for Press Day to announce an erosion control project at the MS Agriculture and Forestry Museum on July 17. See inside story page 3.*

Being this is the Fall Issue newsletter, I would like to say a Happy Thanksgiving, Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year if I don't get to see you before then!

David Brunson  
Area Conservationist

## Forestry Wildlife Field Day Triple S Farms, DeKalb, MS

Owned and managed by landowner Jonathan Smith, the seven generational family "Triple S Farm" in Kemper County was the site of a Forestry Wildlife Field Day held on May 16. Interested farmers and landowners were introduced to intensive hardwood silviculture practices, invasive species control, Pine Tip Moth control, fire ant control, food plot management, waterfowl habitat and fisheries management, control burning, mid-rotation release and other herbicide application techniques, genetics, site prep, proper thinning methods and tree selection, the establishment and management of native warm season grasses, wildflowers as pollinators, and backyard wildlife habitat. **More on page 2.**



*NRCS Area Wildlife Biologist Jason Keenan speaks to landowners about the benefits of establishing and managing native warm season grasses.*

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## Forestry Wildlife Field Day Triple S Farms, DeKalb, MS (*Continued*)

Photos by Judi Craddock, Justin Fritscher, and Joxelle Velazquez



*Well managed pine stand.*



*Fish and waterfowl habitat out the front door.*



*From left:  
Landowner  
Mrs. Mary  
Smith and  
her sister-in-  
-law, Grace  
Caperton  
Gibson,  
were  
among  
those  
hosting the  
field day..*



*Jason Keenan, Area 2 Wildlife Biologist and one of the presenters  
at the field day, poses in a planted wildflower pollinator habitat.  
Photo by Justin Fritscher.*



*Professional foresters and landowners discuss fire management  
in pine timber stands.*



*Presenters with International Forest Seed Company discussed  
the advantages of choosing tree seeding genetics.*



*Evidence—  
something is afoot!*

*Jonathan Smith,  
MFC and  
International Forest  
Company employees  
were also speakers.*





## Erosion Control Project Announced at Ag Museum Press Conference

*Photos by Judi Craddock*

On July 17, 2013, an erosion control project was announced by Miss. Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Cindy Hyde-Smith and NRCS Acting State Conservationist Kevin Kennedy at the entrance of the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum. Designed by Area 2 engineers Shannon McCarty and E. J. Tynes, the project consists of grade stabilization structures that will help to alleviate stormwater runoff and further erosion on the museum property. The project will also serve as a demonstration area for teaching the public how these structures consisting of berms, drop pipes, and rock check dams can be used to prevent erosion and help stabilize streambanks.



**From left:** Jim Lipe, MDAC; E. J. Tynes and Kevin Kennedy, NRCS; discuss construction of the new erosion control project.



**Above:** Kevin Kennedy and Cindy Hyde-Smith welcome everyone to the day's event.



**Right:** Kevin Kennedy, David Brunson, and Kurt Readus represent NRCS at the press conference.



**Above:** Keep Mississippi Beautiful Board Chair Becky Morgan (center) presents Jeannine May and Bill Russell with an award garnered by the staff of NRCS for the agency's commitment to KMB projects. Photo by Justin Fritscher.



**Left to right:** NRCS' David Brunson, Kelvin Jackson, and Julie Kent pose at the planting of a flower bed in front of Kemper Academy Private School in DeKalb, MS, as part of the Keep Mississippi Beautiful/Great American Clean-up in DeKalb, MS. Photo by Justin Fritscher.





## Alcorn State University Extension Program's 2013 Agricultural Field Day Small Farm Incubator Center June 6, 2013, Preston, MS



*"Enhancing Farm Income Through the Adoption of Alternative Enterprises"* was the theme for the 2013 Agriculture Field Day hosted by Alcorn State University Extension Program (ASUEP) in partnership with NRCS State Office, Area 2 personnel, and Mississippi State University Extension Service (MSUES) at their Small Farm Incubator Center near Preston, MS.

Among the many technical and outreach presentations, a few included Silvopasture information from NRCS State Forester Alan Holditch; Soil Health provided by NRCS State Conservation Agronomist Walter Jackson; USDA-NRCS High Tunnel programs and crop production by Supervisory District Conservationist Kelvin Jackson and Area Extension Agent, MSUES, Dr. Wayne Porter. Other topics included low cost irrigation, USDA programs, and marketing opportunities. Community partnership, farm and financial management were outreach topics presented by Frank Taylor, Winston County Self Help Corporation; and Joshua Coleman, ASUEP.





## State Office Professionals Provide Outstanding Silvopasture Technical Assistance to Lauderdale County

*Submitted by Kelvin Jackson*

NRCS State Conservation Agronomist Walter Jackson; NRCS State Forester Alan Holditch; and Area 2 Wildlife Biologist Jason Keenan recently provided Silvopasture technical assistance to Lauderdale County Field Office due to the very unique, challenging and untraditional situations that were being faced by three of their producers. Silvopasture is defined as the deliberate integration of trees and grazing livestock operations on the same land.

The pictures included here are of two HU producers—Cleo Gaddis and Hazel Wilson—that were provided outstanding technical assistance and recommendations by this “Dream Team” of resource professionals.

Mr. Gaddis raises small ruminants (goats) and wanted more forage in his woods grazing. Removal of some of his trees in order to provide sunlight for growing more forage was recommended, but still leaving enough timber for production purposes.

Ms. Wilson needed to improve grazing for about 12 head of cattle in an area surrounded by trees. Walter Jackson (pictured below) provided recommendations to her that would improve her total grazing operation.

“In my opinion, the technical assistance that was provided by these resource professionals was far better than any financial assistance that we could provide,” stated Kelvin Jackson.





## Lowndes County Earth Day Garden Dedication

*Submitted by Wallace Cade*

*Photos by David Hester, Lowndes County SWCD*

The Annunciation Catholic School in Columbus, MS, had its Earth Day celebration on April 22 with a Garden Dedication that the students and their school teacher, Ms. Jacquelyn Junkins, built on the school grounds.

NRCS as well as the Lowndes County SWCD were invited to be the speakers. Around 100 people attended including students, the local newspaper (*Commercial Dispatch*), and local TV station WCBI.

Students and attendees were taught the importance of soils and the importance of food production for future generations.

They also explained how NRCS and SWCD ensure that people involved with food and fiber production have every resource available to assist them in this production, as well as in protecting the soil for future production. The students had been very involved with making this garden work, and will be maintaining it throughout the growing season.





## Outreach Forestry Field Day, Lauderdale, MS April 27, 2013

*Photos by Joxelle Velazquez*



At the Antioch Baptist Church in rural Lauderdale, MS, an Outreach Field Day was held on April 27, 2013. The event was a huge success, as you can plainly see above in another beautiful collage arranged by **Joxelle Velazquez**. Topics for the day included information on federal funds available to assist management of forestland, managing heir's property, managing native stands for maximum profit, economics of long leaf versus loblolly pine, membership benefits of a local forestry association, marketing timber for highest dollar value, and using soil types to choose best timber varieties for planting. Congratulations to Supervisory District Conservationist Kelvin Jackson and his staff who worked hard to make this a success!

A special thank you goes to Joxelle who made this beautiful collage of photos.



## Choctaw Fresh Produce— A Tribal Success Story

*Story by Judi Craddock*

*Photos by Justin Fritscher*

In the Choctaw community of Conehatta, Miss., excitement abounds with the promise of fresh fruits and vegetables for this small community, and the schools and businesses linked with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

Dick Hoy, the new General Manager for Choctaw Fresh Produce, is on a personal mission to bring better food choices to the Tribe, and to hopefully do something about the high rate of diabetes among Tribal communities. "This is a whole new adventure for me," Hoy says. "I'm so excited about a totally new challenge at this stage of my life."

In early April 2013, Hoy was responsible for the building of three seasonal high tunnels in the Conehatta Community. In early April 2013, Hoy was responsible for the building of three seasonal high tunnels in the Conehatta Community.

USDA-NRCS Tribal Liaison, Timothy Oakes, who works hand in hand with the Choctaw people, assisted with the conservation resource management plan for this project, and also the development of farm related plans and agreements between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Choctaw real-estate program.



*From left: USDA-NRCS Tribal Liaison Timothy Oakes; Dick Hoy, General Manager for Choctaw Fresh Produce; and Tribal day worker, examine the growth of newly planted vegetables inside a new seasonal high tunnel.*



*Three newly constructed seasonal high tunnels in the Conehatta Community.*

"A farm management plan must be in place to receive a long term lease agreement for the use of agricultural lands held in trust by the Tribe," stated Oakes. "There are plans to include additional houses in field locations on Tribal land."



*Timothy Oakes and Dick Hoy go over the conservation plan for any necessary changes.*

"Diabetes affects nearly 40 percent of the Choctaw population, mainly caused by poor food choices as a life style," stated Hoy. "Getting the children started eating fresh produce is one of my main goals to help prevent and reduce the rate of this disease. Apparently it's working because already there has been a dramatic improvement since the Choctaws began a Farmers' Market and producing their own food. It will only get better with the use of seasonal high tunnels!"





*Dick Hoy inspects the rows of prepared beds ready for planting vegetables.*

Another plus is that there is no “middle man” to drive up prices as the produce goes straight from the farm to the restaurants, homes and businesses. The cost of the produce is kept at a minimum. Hoy hires day laborers at minimum wage that will be responsible for planting, maintaining, and harvesting. These projects will be creating job opportunities as well as health opportunities. Putting local Tribal people to work as well as providing a source for fresh produce for local businesses such as their restaurants and casinos is a much needed enterprise in this area.

Another goal for Hoy is starting gardens to help educate the children about vegetable gardening, as well as cattle and agriculture as a whole, aiming towards the schools being self-sufficient. He wants them to learn where their food comes from; and intends to develop curriculum for the schools that will include basic botany, horticulture, cooking, marketing, and the process of growing food. What a set of goals!

The high tunnels were constructed by a Lucedale, Miss. contractor, Tubular Construction. An inexpensive water soluble fertilizer is used. Fertilizer is injected into a tube and valves lead it through filters and on to the plants. No high pressure irrigation is needed because a “proportioner” that regulates the flow is utilized.

The tunnels will be fully automated and many functions will be handled by phone such as motors and timers for raising and lowering the sides of the tunnel to allow more air flow for warmer months and protection from the cold during cooler months. A perimeter fence will be constructed to keep out deer and other destructive animals.

A greenhouse has also been established where transplants are being raised; and the tribe would like to expand the operation. An old Ford property will be used to wash and strip produce and then carry to Farmer's Market.



*Blueberries are growing in orchards on 10 acres between Attala and Leake county lines as well as a small orchard of Asian pears and persimmons.*

Comby spends a lot of time giving briefing sessions to the workers (General Agriculture 101) and documenting every phase of the plantings. From the time you plant, fertilize, or do anything to the plants themselves, you have to document it as regulated by the new FDA Food Safety Modernization Act recordkeeping requirements for traceability of possible food contaminants. The facilities are doing everything they can to get USDA certified and are building an office nearby to help with all the business aspects of the project.

*Right: The Choctaw Fresh Produce workers including Tim Oakes (far left) and Dick Hoy (front middle).*

Cover crops planted inside the tunnels will be hairy vetch and clover, speckled peas, and legumes to increase nitrogen. They are staying away from chemicals to a bare minimum. “I’m learning a lot from my experiences of failure and success,” Hoy said.

Vegetables planted in the tunnels include Bok Choy, a variety of peppers, eggplant, tomatoes, squash, peas, cucumbers (coming in the fall), okra, and one entire tunnel house of tomatoes.

In Tucker, an older and smaller Choctaw community, there are three more seasonal high tunnels managed by Facility Coordinator Tim Comby. He will be putting 60 day laborers to work to assist in growing the produce for the local restaurants and casinos.







## Neshoba County Holds First Annual “Conservation: Pass It Down”

*Submitted by Erica Fortenberry  
Photos by Russell Singleton*

The Neshoba County Soil and Water Conservation District, the Neshoba County Forestry Association, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Mississippi State Extension Service held the first annual “Conservation: Pass It Down” on May 30, 2013, at the Neshoba County Coliseum for a crowd of 57.

The purpose of this event was to teach fun, educational, hands-on activities that you can do at home; to help educate, excite, and engage youth about their current and upcoming responsibilities to be good stewards of our natural resources during their lifetime.

Presenters were Jeannine May, NRCS; Harold Anderson, Neshoba Forestry Association; Brad Joiner, Mississippi Forestry Commission; Jeff Wilson, Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission; Margaret White, Mississippi State Extension Service; and Joe McGee, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science. The highlight of the night was the Watershed Harmony Musical, Environmental Puppet Theatre produced and performed by Bayou Town Productions and sponsored by the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality. Mrs. Nell Hughes, the person who started the original Grandparents Day, was present at this event.



*Neshoba County District Clerk Erica Fortenberry and Mrs. Nell Hughes at the opening of the first annual Conservation: Pass It Down in Neshoba County.*



*Left: Mrs. Nell Hughes and Jeff Wilson share a moment.*



*State Office Public Affairs Specialist Jeannine May unpacks a basket of food used to educate the children on where our food comes from.*



*Supervisory District Conservationist Priscilla Williamson and Noxubee County Soil Conservation Technician Jeff Fortenberry were present to give their support for the event.*



*Watershed Harmony actors and Jeannine May engage a student in some of the night's activities.*



## City Fellow Turns Country in Oktibbeha County, Mississippi

Story by Judi Craddock, Photos by Jason Keenan

In rural Oktibbeha County, not far from the Mississippi State University (Bulldogs) campus at Starkville rests the county's first certified goat farm. Brad Spencer, a native of Chicago, Illinois, stated, "I've started a legacy for my family with goat farming."

The 400 acres of family land, once totally in pastureland for cattle and horses since the 1940's, was divided among family members by Spencer's mother-in-law. He and his wife, Rita, now own 8 acres and lease 17.5 more acres. After 26 years with Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceuticals in Chicago as a mechanical engineer, and 13 more years with a cable company, Spencer retired and wanted to start a new endeavor. Rita, a native of the area, really didn't want to return to Mississippi after spending most of her life up north; but he finally talked her into it as he really wanted to be a farmer for his family.

First thinking about cattle farming, he changed his mind after talking with friends who were raising goats. Since his arrival, he has learned quickly by paying attention to people who know what they're doing, and discovering what it takes to care for goats—health issues, condition of the land, and getting help from USDA-NRCS to get started in the business.

After joining the Winston County Self-Help Cooperative, he learned through meetings and workshops about assistance available to new farmers through USDA-NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and contacted Soil Conservationist Terry Todd in the Starkville NRCS Field Office. Terry informed Spencer about the Small Ruminant Farmer Initiative designed to help landowners install a variety of conservation practices aimed at boosting water quality and quantity and increasing soil health for ruminant animals such as goats and sheep.

Practices include fencing, ponds, watering facilities, and heavy use protection areas. On March 19, 2013, Spencer was funded for EQIP and approved for boundary and cross fencing to provide rotational grazing for the goats, as well as a watering facility and pest management. **Continued on next page.**



*Terry Todd, Soil Conservationist with USDA-NRCS; and Brad Spencer, new Oktibbeha County "pioneer" beginning goat farmer, take a look at the conservation practices recently completed on the goat farm.*



*Boundary fencing on the Spencer Goat Farm.*



*Terry Todd is helpful with NRCS practices that can help improve Mr. Spencer's goat operation.*



*Brad Spencer is happy to be goat farming and looking forward to leaving a legacy for his family.*





*The goat herd, although small at this time, has a great protector—a White Pyrenees known for their long history of guardians for livestock herds.*

**Continued from previous page:** Since approval and funding for these practices, Spencer has completed all the boundary fencing consisting of 4,115 feet, and cross fencing consisting of 1,187 feet. He has also completed his watering facility to provide fresh water for the goats. He still has pest management to complete on his contract, and he is only six months into the contract. He has obtained six goats including one nanny that is expecting soon.

A market for the goat meat has already been established as well—the local Belle Foods (headquartered out of Birmingham, Alabama) wants to buy the goat meat and local fresh vegetables. Something new is certainly happening in Oktibbeha County!

The rapidly growing goat meat market is due to the increased population of ethnic consumers in the nation, and a desire for leaner, healthier red meat alternative to pork and beef. There is also a growing market for goat cheese, goat milk, and an assortment of health and beauty products such as soap and lotions handcrafted from goat milk.

“Assistance from Terry Todd and others with NRCS has been more than helpful in providing information and lists of people that can help me get with getting our farm prepared for raising goats,” stated Spencer. Since February 2013, Todd has been working with him on plans for the farm as well as providing vendor lists for Spencer to select from in installing conservation practices such fencing. NRCS looks forward to assisting Spencer with any future conservation needs, which at the present time include more cross-fencing and a pond.



*The herd is growing! A new baby goat is shown above only three hours old, born Aug. 22, 2013.*



*Cross fencing with gate and posts shown.*



*Watering facility and heavy use area practices.*



## Conservation Improves Leake County Pasture, Water Downstream

*Submitted by Candace Chambers*



*Above: Mr. Charles McLaurin, Leake County cattle rancher, is working hard to improve grazing on his land as well as improve water quality downstream.*

Raising hay and working the farm was once something extra for Charles McLaurin.

But after retiring after 35 years as a school teacher, he's enjoying his new full-time job—a cattle ranch in Leake County. With the help of USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, he is using conservation practices to improve his operations and help the environment.

McLaurin enrolled in NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), enabling him to remove invasive grasses and build cross fencing. With the right grass and the right number of pastures, he was able to operate a rotational grazing system on his land. When cattle are alternated among pastures, it prevents overgrazing which can lead to soil erosion.

"By him cross fencing, it has allowed him to rotate his cows to get a more uniformed grazing for his livestock operation," NRCS Supervisory District Conservationist Priscilla Williamson said.

McLaurin's conservation work is improving water quality downstream. Water from his farm eventually flows into the Yockanookany River, which drains into the Pearl River, and ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico. The more efficient grass on the property serves as a filter to solve soil erosion problems causing less sediment and fewer pesticides to flow into the main watershed.

He demonstrates the African proverb, "*Each One, Teach One*" by sharing his success and knowledge about NRCS' resources with fellow farmers. He has formed a working group with farmers from Madison, Leake and Scott Counties to discuss how they can take advantage of what NRCS has to offer. "With the NRCS helping me, I did more than I would have done on my own," he said.

With 26 calves this season, McLaurin is ready for more success in the beef market and is continuing to conserve the land. "NRCS has helped me so much, and I appreciate all the good things they have done for me," he said.



*Mr. McLaurin demonstrates one of his pastures where rotational grazing has been successful.*



*Fencing is another conservation practice that has been a tremendous help with the overall livestock operation.*





*From left: NRCS District Conservationist Nathan Tadlock; Roy Thigpen, Sr.; Roy Thigpen, Jr.; Lonnie Thigpen; and NRCS Soil Conservationist Corey Ware on the Thigpen Tree Farm.*

## Thigpen Tree Farm—

### A Jasper County Success Story

*Story and Photos  
by Judi Craddock*

The Thigpen Tree Farm operation in Jasper County, MS, owned by Lonnie Thigpen and close family members, encompasses 750 acres of pristine timberland, 10 farm ponds used for wildlife watering and flood control, and plenty of deer and turkey hunting grounds to last a large family a lifetime. Lonnie, a tree farmer in the Montrose community near Louin, MS; his brother Roy Sr., and sister Dorris Williams (not shown) inherited the land from their parents, Chester and Rossett Thigpen, and live on the property. Roy, Jr., has already become one of the main managers on the land and has his own home and family homestead there as well.

The tree farm, primarily used for timber production and wildlife habitat, has improved significantly with NRCS technical assistance from District Conservationist Nathan Tadlock; Jasper County NRCS Soil Conservationist Corey Ware, and previous NRCS district conservationists over the years. In fact, Lonnie is one of our own—a retired NRCS District Conservationist for Jasper County (retired in 2005).

Increased wildlife habitat, stimulation of timber growth, as well as increased esthetic value of the property, are all direct benefits from using NRCS programs and practices such as upland wildlife



*Plenty of deer and turkey hunting as well as fishing opportunities are available to the family and hunting clubs.*

habitat management, clearing of underbrush, constructing fire lanes, and other timber related practices.

Roy, Sr., has completed one WHIP contract on his section of land as follows: 100 acres of controlled burning done on a scheduled rotation; 20,000 feet of fire lanes; and 30 acres of upland wildlife habitat management. He also currently has an application for 45 acres of site preparation and planting under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

*Fire lanes (shown at right) are planned/used for the containment of prescribed fire and occasionally used for the exclusion of fire from sensitive areas such as hardwood tree plantings.*







*Lonnie said he wants to cut this 30 year-old stand 40 years from now when he's 104!*



*Chester and Rosett Thigpen, were Mississippi and National Tree Farm winners in 1994-1995 and 1996. They also received the Good Samaritan Award for Arbor Day in Omaha, Nebraska; and the Centennial Award for farms in operation for over 100 years!*



*Roy Thigpen, Sr., loves riding through the property showing his part of the beautiful stands of loblolly pine. In some areas you can see where Hurricane Katrina took its toll on some of the trees.*

work on this place wouldn't have been done. I couldn't have done all this without their help." Lonnie and his family highly recommend NRCS to friends and neighbors throughout the county. Outreach meetings, field days and workshops are ways he keeps up-to-date with available programs.

Lonnie, who is presently a soil and water conservation district commissioner for Jasper County, began his first Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) contract about 10 years ago in 2003. After attending several NRCS sponsored meetings and workshops on prescribed burning, he signed up for the WHIP program. To date, the following three practices have been completed on Lonnie's property: 194 acres of controlled burning which is done on a scheduled rotation; 27,060 feet of fire lanes constructed and maintained; and 81 acres of upland wildlife habitat management.

The family land is very special to Lonnie. His maternal grandparents, Dan and Hester Kelly, were the original owners over 110 years ago. Granddad Kelly worked with a logging operation on the land, and ran a dummy line (temporary railroad track) to carry lumber out to the main line. He had moved around so much that he finally wanted to settle down. The owners of the logging operation sold the land to Kelly; and he began farming as a dairy farmer, with cattle and row crops too. At one time the whole place was in corn and cotton.

The timber production years started in 1974 when Lonnie and his family started planting trees, which began with changing 50 acres from cotton crop, cattle and timber into coastal Bermuda grass, then loblolly pine. The original stand of pine trees is still standing! Lonnie said they once found the bones of old mules when they were first planting trees on the property. The original size of the farm was 500 acres.



*Roy Sr., Lonnie and Roy, Jr., are happy to be taking care of their family land!*

The Thigpens have held five field days including an Outstanding Tree Farm Field Day, tours, and conservation youth seminars for 5th-6th graders.

A recent outstanding video was produced featuring the Thigpen Tree Farm (National/MS Outstanding Tree Farm) Field Day: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyPITSOSVpM>

"NRCS in Jasper County has been a life saver to me," stated Lonnie.

"Without their encouragement and incentive programs, most of the



## Lowndes County Farmer Learns Perseverance and Conservativeness Pay Off

Story by Judi Craddock

Photos by Judi Craddock and Justin Brassel



*Charlie Pilkinton and Justin Brassel stand in a no-till corn field on the farm.*

Charlie Pilkinton knows what it takes to be a successful farmer during a time of economic problems—being persistent with whatever you want to accomplish and being conservative with everything, especially watching expenses carefully these days.

As a long time Lowndes County farmer, he remembers how hard it was starting out—buying land, farm equipment, and seed. “Not many young people are growing up to be farmers,” stated Pilkinton who has a history of family farming since the 1800’s.

Pilkinton who graduated from Mississippi State University with an accounting degree, and then worked for years with the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway, leased his first cropland (140 acres) and began his life as a farmer in 1980. After learning a lot from his neighbors and MSU soybean specialists, he became a “scratch and plant” farmer believing it was more economical to make a seedbed and then plant. With the use of modern chemicals he began farming using the “no-till” method which resulted in a lot less soil loss.

Although mostly utilizing the no-till method of farming in the highly erodible prairie type soils, it was difficult at times due to too much organic matter present or too much moisture; and Pilkinton did his share of worrying about the loss of topsoil which he considers his livelihood.

By 1990 with over 2,500 acres of corn, soybean and wheat, he paid close attention the last two years to “preaching” from NRCS Soil

Conservation Technician Justin Brassel who talked to him about conservation practices that could help alleviate his soil loss. A lot of erosion was occurring each time there were heavy rains; and it was becoming more noticeable each year.

Pilkinton installed a Practice 410 Grade Stabilization Structure in 2013 to slow down the velocity of water that was running off his property that was causing a head cut. This 410 structure is constructed to be 780 feet long and has 58 acres of drainage running towards it during a rainfall. It is constructed with two 12-inch pipes allowing water to hit the structure, slowing the velocity and letting the water slowly pass through to the other side while the sediment settles out towards the front. He has installed many more structures like this one in the past in the NRCS’ EQIP program.

“I appreciate all the technical assistance from NRCS and their help in funding these practices; but even more importantly, just being surrounded with good people interested in what they’re doing has meant the most to me,” stated Pilkinton. **Continued on next page.**



*View of soybean and corn fields on the Pilkinton farm.*



**Continued from previous page:**

Pilkinton believes that it's in the best interest of this nation to conserve soil. Pointing out that *National Geographic* has shown that farmland is disappearing on this planet, he stated, "So we need to learn how to get better at farming what we have left. NRCS needs to be a lot more involved in working with farmers on practical practices to improve our farmland."

"My motto in life is to try to create an opportunity for something good to happen," remarked Pilkinton who shares everything with his farm partner, Tony Dancer, and his family. They all enjoy farming and plan to leave this land in the best condition possible as a legacy to their family.



**Above:** Terraces (Practice 600) installed on the farm have been successful to shorten the slopes and divert water to a controlled inlet, preventing major soil loss on the field.



**Above:** Storage bins for grain located near the corn fields.

**Right:** No-till planting method on a corn field. This successful conservation cropping system is used for residue management and improving soil quality and quantity. The amount of topsoil saved on the land as well as reduced fuel costs in tillage adds to the profitability of the crop production.



**Above:** Josh Tilly, Soil Conservationist, holds flags to mark area for 780 feet grade stabilization structure.  
**Below:** Construction of two 12-inch pipes that will drain water to other side of the levee.



## Small Ruminant (Goat) Field Day and Workshop Royals International, LLC Pickett Farms, Crystal Springs, MS

*Photos by Judi Craddock*

August 5, 2013, was a very special day for Hinds County. Focusing on providing education for new producers and those highly interested in the rapidly increasing nationwide market for goat meat, several conservation partners including Hinds County Soil and Water Conservation District, Alcorn State University Extension Program, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Mississippi Soil and Water Conservation Commission, the Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI) Program, Winston County Self-Help Cooperative, and Royals International Corporation sponsored a tremendously impressive Small Ruminant (Goat) Field Day and Workshop. Held on the (over a century old) family farm of brothers Charles and Dwayne Pickett, the field day included a tour of the Royals International meat goat operation, the first of its kind in Mississippi and now the largest in the United States.

Starting only two years ago (2012) with a transition from cattle to goats (and sheep) farming, the operation includes their own processing and supplying to the grocers. "There is no middle man," stated Dwayne Pickett, "and our goal is to create the optimum meat goat farm to meet the needs of the growing market." The rapidly growing goat meat market is due to the increased population of ethnic consumers as well as a desire for leaner, healthier red meat alternative to pork and beef.

According to the Picketts, "There's a lot of work involved with raising goats—they often get sick, mostly because they come to us from as far away as Nebraska. It takes them awhile to adjust to Mississippi's climate. We have lost quite a few, but the new ones born here do much better."

Topics of the workshop included technical and conservation programs available from Alcorn State University (Dr. Dalton McAfee, Dr. Cassandra Vaughn, Dr. Gregory Reed, Dr. Barry Bequette, and Dr. M. Christopher Brown, II); USDA-NRCS programs and conservation practices available (Murray Fulton, Reginald Spears, Kevin Kennedy, and Dr. Homer Wilkes). The workshop ended with the ceremonial signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Alcorn State University and Royals International, LLC.

A very special note of gratitude goes to the Pickett Family and all those who helped coordinate this extraordinary event.



*Dwayne and Julian Pickett, father and son, along with Dwayne's brother Charles (below), hosted the field day on their farm.*



*Dr. Charles Pickett, CEO and President of Royals International, LLC, and farm manager, welcomed all field day attendees to Pickett Farms.*



*Many attendees came from all over the state to this educational event.*



*Over 5,000 goats and sheep graze throughout the 1,800 acres that used to be totally in cattle ranching. The goats seen here at the field day were scheduled to be at the market the very next day.*





*Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Alcorn State University and Royals International, LLC*



*Dr. Cassandra Vaughn, University Veterinarian and Professor of Agriculture at Alcorn State University, checks out the coral area on the farm.*



*Delmer Stamps checks out the trailer used for the farm tour which he and many others helped to coordinate.*



*New Orleans Chef and his expert staff that served delicious BBQ goat and lamb cuisine.*



*Congressman Bennie Thompson, guest speaker for the day.*



# Trail boss

*Conservationist George Heard honored at Turkey Creek*

Newton County Honors  
Former District  
Conservationist George  
Heard

*Submitted by Joe Addy*



Conservationist George Heard (center) was joined by his family during Friday's dedication ceremony at Turkey Creek Water Park. From left, Tom Heard of Tupelo, Charles Dorsett of Pensacola, Fla., Sarah Jane Wilbourne of Forest, All Beth Wilbourne, Melissa Dorsett, and Beth Eason of Forest.

By Bill Graham

bgraham@newtoncountyscoop.com

Respected conservationist George Heard was surrounded by friends and family Friday as a rehabilitated trail bearing his name was unveiled at the Turkey Creek Water Park.

The trail's renovation was a joint effort between Scout Troop 46 in Decatur, the Newton County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Pat Harrison Waterway District.

Sam Mitchell, a 17-year-old student at Leake Academy, led the project to earn his Eagle Scout badge.

Mitchell, his troop, and others cleared the trail of limbs, logs, and brush, then put up new posts. New signs describing the park's flora now sit atop the posts, which line the trail.

A tall wooden bulletin board — with Heard's legacy carved right into the wood — greets visitors at the trail's entrance. The bulletin board will allow the district to post maps and information, and place pamphlets and other education

material for users to have as they use the trail.

"That was a challenge to build," Mitchell said. "It took two or three days to finish. The holes in the ground were about six feet deep."

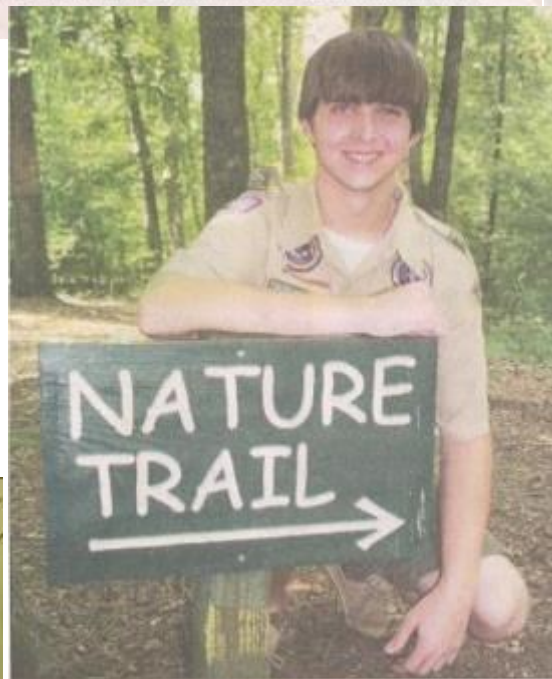
Heard, a veteran of World War II, earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Mississippi State University. He started working for the Soil Conservation Service conservation legacy in 1967, serving in Tupelo, Houston, and Decatur.

In 1972, Heard became the District Conservationist in Newton County, where he worked until his retirement in 1989.

"I enjoyed every bit of it," Heard said at Friday's ceremony.

Under Heard's leadership, the Turkey Creek Water Park was finished in 1980.

He later served as a district commissioner for the Newton County Soil and Water from 1998 through 2012, and has also served the Pat Harrison Waterway District as a board member since 1996.



Sam Mitchell of Boy Scout Troop 46 in Decatur led the trail's renovation to earn his Eagle badge.





On a very warm and humid September 26th, Secretary of Agriculture Thomas Vilsack held a Town Hall Meeting right in the middle of "Old Town Mississippi" at the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Museum. NRCS Public Affairs Specialist Jeannine May and many

helpers rushed to put the meeting together after very little notice; and as usual they did a great job! The Secretary discussed hope for urgent passage of a new Farm Bill, and held an open meeting for folks to vocalize their issues. Several citizens addressed him with concerns regarding USDA safety, small farming opportunities and other problems that he promised to take back with him to be addressed from his office. Thank you, Secretary Vilsack, for coming to Mississippi!

## Secretary of Agriculture Visits Mississippi and Area 2

*Photos by Judi Craddock*







## News Around Area 2

### The Keep Mississippi Beautiful/Keep Meridian/Lauderdale County Beautiful Great American Cleanup

A special note of thanks goes to many NRCS folks and others who helped coordinate this successful event. At left, **Joxelle Velazquez**, Soil Scientist in Meridian, put together this beautiful collage of The People's Garden in Meridian.



### 2013 Rolling Thunder Bikers Visits Meridian Field Office

*Submitted by Kelvin Jackson*

Alan Atkins (former DC in Bedford, VA) **pictured at far right above**, stopped by the Meridian Field Office on his way through the area with the 2013 Rolling Thunder Ride to Washington, DC, in honor of Veterans each Memorial Day. Many groups converge and make up the 250,000 bikers expected in DC each year. Alan serves as Chaplain of his group of several hundred bikers who began in California. As the bikers passed by the Service Center (**see photo below**), there were three people standing outside next to the NRCS white trucks, so Alan veered off to go and speak to them. One of the people was the DC there (Kelvin Jackson), who was thrilled to discover that one of the bikers was a fellow member of the NRCS family!



*"Star of the Day" Dawn Brace, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician in DeKalb, MS, told the media all about NRCS and the Great American Cleanup/Keep Mississippi Beautiful Team efforts last April. Photo by Joxelle Velazquez.*







## Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Receives Special Elders Award

*Submitted by Tim Oakes*

Virginia Willis of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians received a special Elders appreciation award for her years of dedicated service to the USDA/NRCS Southeastern American Indian Working Group. The presentation of the award signed by former State Conservationist Dr. Homer Wilkes was made by NRCS Tribal Liaison Timothy Oakes and presented at the MBCI Department of Natural Resources and NRCS Mississippi Choctaw Field Office. Virginia is the Tribal Extension Coordinator for MBCI and has been an uplifting voice of communication on government to government, use of conservation programs, community work, counseling sessions, protocol assistance and special 4-H projects on Tribal lands. She is constantly providing counseling to aspiring youth and assistance in identifying and encouraging local conservation needs.

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*Left: Joxelle Velazquez and Justin Fritscher enjoying the Wildlife and Forestry Field Day.*



*Lonnie Thigpen of Jasper County and Nathan Tadlock take a breather after touring through the woods on a hot day.*



*Does anyone know this guy? Yep, it's our old employee Jeffrey Lee at the Wildlife and Forestry Field Day!*

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